FRIEDA KIEFER MERRY

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FUTURE POSSIBILITIES IN THE EDUCATION OF BLIND CHILDREN

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The education of blind children in the United States began about a hundred years ago with the establishment of the three pioneer institutions at New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. These schools were supported by private agencies, and it was not until they had demonstrated the possibility of educating blind children that the States undertook their training at public expense. In 1837 the Ohio legislature appropriated funds for the establishment of a school for the blind, and invited Dr. Samuel G. Howe, first director of the New England Asylum for the Blind (now known as the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind) to organize the project. This was the first state school for blind children, and in the twenty-five years following there was a rapid increase in the number of such institutions. Today there are 6,000 blind children enrolled in fifty-four state institutions, seven private schools and in special public day school classes in fifteen cities.

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Although considerable progress in methods of teaching blind children has been made during the past century, much remains to be done, as many of the original problems still exist, modified to some extent by changes in economic conditions. It is the purpose of this article to outline briefly some of the more outstanding of these problems and to indicate their importance in the future development of facilities for the education of blind children.

The importance of pre-school training for blind children was recognized by Dr. S. G. Howe in 1875, and he issued a pamphlet entitled, "Counsels to Parents of Blind Children." This contained a wealth of practical information and served as the basis for much of the literature which was circulated later to parents by superintendents, teachers, and agencies for the blind. Although some of Dr. Howe's ideas are no longer tenable, his central theme, the normalization of blind children, will always remain the fundamental goal in their education.

In the treatment of their young blind children parents are apt to follow one of two extremes: either they neglect their children entirely, allowing them to shift for themselves as best they can, or they devote all their time and energy to their handicapped offspring. In the former case such children usually lack initiative and resourcefulness; are unable to dress or feed themselves, and develop undesirable habits and mannerisms. In the latter case they become self-centered, develop asocial attitudes and have difficulty in conforming to general school routine. Either of these two methods will be detrimental to the development of young blind children, and, in most instances, can be averted if parents can be persuaded to adopt a more intelligent attitude toward their training.

In previous years it was supposed that nursery schools—where homeless children, those with particularly poor home environments, and those needing frequent and special medical care could be sent—would solve this highly important problem. Such, however, has not been the case. According to statistics issued in 1930 there were at that time 700 blind children of pre-school age scattered over the entire United States. Of this number only 51 were enrolled in nurseries. It is interesting to note, also, that all but one of these nurseries are located in the Eastern States. Thus, these are not only inadequate to care for a considerable number of children living in widely

Ohio State University, under the direction of Prof. G. Oscar Russell.

The Laboratory Method thus sprang out of the immediate necessity for offering to the University student of impaired hearing, a means of supplementing the faulty audible perception of sound, with an alert visual perception. In other words, the completion of a college education by such students in many cases depends upon their skill in interpreting with the eye, the part of the lecture which the ear fails to hear. Since the term "lip-reading" as applied to this art is inadequate, suggesting as it does the focusing of the attention on the lips alone, and that of "speech reading" (of more recent usage) is confusing because of its application in the field of Public Speaking, the term "Visual Hearing" is offered as substitute. This seems to be accurately expressive of what the hard-of-hearing person really does, that is, "hears what he sees."

The Visual Hearing or Laboratory Method consists of a complete series of lessons, so constructed as to include practice on all the elements of speech, progressing gradually from the easily discernible labial consonants such as "f," "wh," "p," "b," and "m" to the more obscure palatal plosives, "k," "g," and "ng." Each lesson in the series is spoken by a subject, before a motion picture camera, thus recording photographically the rapid succession of speech movements, together with the interplay of the network of facial muscles, which register the emotional keynote to the speaker's thought.

A high quality synchronous record of the speech sounds, made simultaneously with the photography of the subject matter of the lesson, provides an accurate check on the pronunciation of the speaker, as well as any speech mannerism, such as, for example, the characteristic vowel quality for the Southerner, (bao or bæo); and the omission of the final consonant "r"; also the pronunciation of the tip-trilled "r" as given by certain speakers.

The lesson content is arranged in three parts; the first contains the subject matter proper, printed on little cards, the student comparing the printed word with its pictorial representation on the speaker's face; the second part presents a test of the subject matter of part one, the student being made to interpret what is said merely by the visual speech movements; the third part by pertinent questions, tests the skill of the student in mastering the lesson content.

In a specially equipped laboratory the lesson films are projected on a motion picture screen. It is here that the student makes his preparation, writing his intepretation of the subject matter of the lesson in his laboratory manual provided for the purpose. A specially constructed projector permits the film to run from beginning to end, as frequently as is necessary to acquaint the observer with the knowledge of the fundamental principles involved. The completed lesson preparation is then corrected and discussed in class, and new assignments made.

Thus it will be readily seen, that while Visual Hearing training is given under the direction of a teacher, it is accomplished primarily through the students' own effort—and thus obviously such methods seem capable of advantageous adaptation not only in the university courses for hard-of-hearing students, but in the public primary and secondary schools, residential and day schools and lip-reading classes sponsored by Leagues for the Hard-of-Hearing as well.

scattered areas, but also they neglect educational training and become mere child-caring establishments. The most ideal institution can never replace the atmosphere of an ordinary home with its bonds of affection, and it is not unusual for parents to be unwilling to send their young offspring to a far-distant nursery. If no other provision is made for the child he may remain at home until he is eight or nine years old (and often even older) before he is compelled to attend a residential school for the blind. His period of training there will be unnecessarily prolonged, as he must first learn those simple tasks and duties which a normal child learns in his pre-school years.

Those who are familiar with this critical problem believe that provision of capable, well-trained home teachers with well-balanced and sympathetic personalities will do more for the development of pre-school blind children than the publication of a ton of instructional literature or the multiplication of present types of nurseries.

From the very beginning of so-called systematic instruction of blind children in this country the enrollment of those of low intelligence in residential schools has evoked much discussion. No adequate provision for them, however, has been made up to the present time. It is recognized that the presence of such children is detrimental to the educational and social progress of normal and superior blind children, but as one superintendent aptly declared: " . . . In theory, none of us admits the feeble-minded; in practice, we all have them." Various committees have studied this problem intensively and have offered the following suggestions:

1. That it is the duty of schools for the training of the seeing feeble-minded to admit the blind feeble-minded;

2. That each state appropriate a small per capita fund to be used to pay the salary of a special teacher of not more than ten educable blind children in the state schools for the feeble-minded;

3. That schools for the blind maintain a separate building (observation cottage) for the training of feeble-minded blind children; and

4. That special private schools care for some of these children.

The argument for delegating the responsibility of training blind feeble-minded children to schools for the feeble-minded is based on the idea that children with dual defects (for instance, feeblemindedness and blindness) should be classified according to the more serious one, and since feeblemindedness is so regarded, then the blind child should be placed with those of his own mental level. Schools for the blind also claim that the mingling of feebleminded children with normal children lowers the standards of educational achievement of the latter and is a social and economic stigma. Undesirable habits and mannerisms are imitated, and if the public sees normal and feebleminded blind children associated together it is apt to regard *all* blind children as mentally subnormal.

With the advent of intelligence testing in schools for the blind (1916), it might have been supposed that these rough measures of ability would be helpful in solving so serious a problem as the admission of those mentally incompetent. With the exception of a very few schools which use tests for the more homogenous grouping of their pupils, this is not generally true. In the future each blind child should be studied as an individual and educated in that environment which will stimulate his maximum development. In general, those children who are judged both by test scores and teachers' opinions to have an Intelligence Quotient below 50 are regarded as uneducable (from the academic point of view), and hence should be trained in schools for the feebleminded, or should be visited in their homes by capable home teachers. Those children below normal intelligence,

with I. Q.'s from 50 to 70 should be taught in schools for the blind in separate classes under the supervision of a teacher who preferably has had experience with seeing feeble-minded children and is familiar with tangible appliances. Children ranging between normal intelligence and feeblemindedness (roughly between 70 and 90 I. Q.) should be taught in the same buildings as normal blind children. They should be segregated for academic work, but should be associated with the other children in social situations.

Visitors to residential schools for the blind are often amazed to find there children with varying degrees of vision. The admission of children with partial sight presents a many-sided problem to the superintendent of a residential institution for the blind. If a child is unable to enter a public school, and if there is no other provision for his education, he is forced to apply for admission to a school for the blind or to remain misunderstood and discouraged in the ordinary seeing schools. If he does enter a school for the blind he must use tangible apparatus and braille books. Frequently he is tempted to read braille with his eyes under very poor conditions of illumination, thus endangering such vision as he possesses. He may, also, through continued association with blind children, imitate their mannerisms or assume an idea of exaggerated importance because sight is regarded as a premium and the partially sighted child is frequently called upon to act as a guide and to assume a number of small responsibilities. Furthermore, graduation from a school for the blind may prove to be an economic handicap, since, despite his vision, he will be generally regarded as a blind person. A few schools for the blind already have initiated sight-saving classes in an attempt to cope with this situation. Such measures are temporary but necessary expedients until these children can be absorbed into local city or rural sight-saving classes adequately equipped and furnished to meet their needs.

Unless the program of study in schools for the blind is fitted to the needs of the children instead of fitting the children to the course of study which, unfortunately, too often happens, blind children will continue to memorize long dissertations; write letters in highly stilted phraseology; and perform a number of other activities which have little meaning for them. The most serious consequences of following a traditional course of study, however, are the loss of initiative and the tendency to develop uninteresting, "wooden" personalities. When educators of the blind learn to teach those fundamentals which function best in business and social life they will have taken an important step in the education of most children without sight. Blind children are seriously retarded academically (three years on the average) partly because of the use of tangible apparatus which is so time consuming. In order to lessen this retardation as much as possible pupils should be sectioned into homogenous groups. This would enable the superior child to accelerate its progress and to obtain an enriched background of experience. It would also help to reduce the extreme unevenness of academic accomplishment which is characteristic of so many blind children. All pupils should have a share in planning entertainments and social functions, and should be allowed more opportunity to exercise initiative in their school program.

Extensive and carefully controlled experiments should be employed to determine the types of subject matter best fitted to the needs of blind pupils, and also to ascertain the most effective methods of teaching them. This can only be accomplished when teachers and superintendents of schools for the blind gain an intelligent understanding of the meaning and function of research.

Undoubtedly, the final criterion for judging the success of the entire educa-

tional system for blind children is the extent to which they are adjusted to seeing people. A century ago the public marveled over a blind child's ability to read tangible print. Today our standards have changed, and it is no longer necessary to demonstrate that blind children are educable. It is far more important to help them to adjust socially so that their well-poised and interesting personalities will overshadow their physical handicap.

Unfortunately, a majority of blind children must be educated in residential institutions, and this environment is not conducive to proper socialization. Special classes for children without sight have been organized in a number of public school systems and are generally more successful in socialization than are residential schools for the blind. Such classes, however, can care for only a relatively small percentage of blind children, so that the residential institution will probably always be a necessity. It remains, therefore, for those in charge of these schools to lessen their institutional atmosphere by promoting as many outside contacts with seeing children as possible. The organization of Scout Work and other types of clubs have proved most helpful, and should be encouraged.

From the foregoing brief sketch it will be seen that there are numerous problems which must be solved by educators of the blind. Pre-school training; problems of low intelligence and partial vision; a functioning program of study, and better socialization seem to be the most important phases in the education of blind children which must be dealt with in the immediate future. The present economic depression, no doubt, is responsible for some of the existing educational stagnation, but as soon as conditions improve there should be a corresponding advance in educational progress.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Henry Herbert Goddard is at present a professor of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology at Ohio State University. He has had such a wide and varied experience at Vineland, Cleveland and Columbus, and includes so many international contacts in his studies that his expressions are received eagerly since "he knows whereof he speaks."

Dr. Francis N. Maxfield is at Ohio State University. He is at present interested in clinical psychology and his interests have always been with the handicapped. The special class teachers of Pennsylvania hold Dr. Maxfield as their ideal in his work with them and their charges.

The third person in our group from Ohio State University is Miss Marie Mason, who has recently been working on a new method in the education of the hard-of-hearing called the Visual Method of Teaching. Miss Mason is working with the Phonetics Laboratory.

A national outlook for our work is presented by Miss Beatrice McLeod, who until recently was State Supervisor of Special Classes in the State of Wyoming. Miss McLeod is now Senior Specialist in the Education of Physically Handicapped Children in the United States Office of Education, Washington, D. C.

Dr. Joseph J. Endres, who is chief of the Physically Handicapped Children's Bureau of the State of New York, has accomplished outstanding work in this field and was very gracious in preparing an article for us.

Dr. Frieda Kiefer Merry was for some time connected with the Perkins Institute and the Massachusetts School for the Blind at Boston. Dr. Merry is now with the Child Guidance Clinic in Dayton, Ohio.

Mr. Harold McMillan is the principal of the largest elementary school in Columbus and is considered one of the most progressive educators in the public school system. Mr. McMillan has been interested in the education of handicapped children and has organized work in that field in his school.

Dr. O. R. Yoder is assistant medical superintendent of the Michigan State Hospital for the Insane at Ypsilanti, Michigan. Dr. Yoder gave an excellent clinic at our Lambda Tau Sigma national convention in Ypsilanti in 1932.

Dr. Louis A. Schwartz of the Clinic for Juvenile Research in Detroit also contributed to our national convention activities. He very kindly consented to preparing this material for our publication. Dr. Schwartz is research assistant for the Institute of Human Relations of Yale University and lecturer in mental hygiene and child guidance for the University of Michigan.

Dr. C. M. Elliott is director of special education at the Michigan State Normal College and we are proud to claim him as one of the founders of Lambda Tau Sigma. Dr. Elliott has furnished the inspirational motive for many young teachers entering the field of special education and has been the guiding light of those who are working day by day with the handicapped child.

CHAPTER NEWS

There is quite a volume of personal news, for which the Editor is grateful. This will be sent to you in our personal news letter with the news from Grand Council meeting.

ALPHA,

Michigan State Normal College,
Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Alpha Chapter has a very interesting program for the year. We will quote directly from the report of the secretary, Miss Elizabeth Payne:

"We engage some faculty member (generally) or some person of local importance who speaks to us on some subject dear to him. Thus far this year we have enjoyed the following discussions:

"Miss Gertrude Roser, of our own department, told of her year of student life in Germany, particularly about their Special Education methods. Her talk was made more interesting by illustrations of books and pictures she collected while in Germany.

"Dr. Jessie Phelps, of the Science Department, was guest speaker at another meeting. Her subject was 'Adjustments.' In this talk she mentioned many of the everyday crises that we have to meet, and helped us to decide how to meet them. Her discussion was most enjoyable and quite timely.

"At a State Conference last fall, Mrs. Maurice Senstius read a paper concerning 'Malnourished Children.' She presented this paper at one of our meetings. It was quite a worthwhile paper and we were proud of her contribution. It caused us to wonder what we should be doing in this field.

"Always at our meetings we serve some dainty, inexpensive refreshments and while the committee prepares them we sing Lambda Tau Sigma songs and have tried to compose some new ones.

"Our Christmas party was made quite gay by the exchange of toys which were later sent to poor children.

"At the beginning of each term we have a lovely tea to which prospective members are invited as guests. Those who later accept our invitation to membership are guests at a formal dinner at Charles McKenny Hall.